

True Odds

By:

[Qyreia Arronen \(#14369\)](#) and [Ruka Tenbriss Ya-ir \(Atyiru Caesura Entar Arconae, #13486\)](#)

[Editor's Version](#)

Dust and debris was still actively being cleared from floor and fixtures alike. The limited attack was, in the grand scheme, something of a waste of resources on the part of the warring parties. For those members of the Brotherhood that had answered the haphazard call to arms, there was plenty to do between departing their home systems to landing on Dandoran. Concocting a means of *acquiring* the mysterious crystals on the auction block was rather conversely and severely complicated by the frackas. Qyreia, replete in her own finery as well as some metal-and-crystal pieces that passed for jewelry, watched with some morbid disgust as she watched a chunk of Twi'leki cranium and lekku be swept aside into a bin as cleanup efforts continued.

"Y'know Ru, I'm glad you're here," she said to the larger Mirialan next to her, dressed in his own sort of finery. "I probably wouldn't have bothered with this particular job otherwise."

"I wish you never had," Ruka managed through gritted teeth, his violet eyes darting around the casino floor like searchlights, scanning for further threats. He was tenser than *beskar* and every muscled, coiled line of him screamed displeasure, shouted of potential movement. He kept leaning nearer her like he was half a second from snatching the Zeltron up and bolting out the nearest window.

With a small shake of his head that looked more like steel snapping, he turned minutely to Qyreia. "But I am glad you asked me to come. At least if this kriff had to happen with you near it, I can be here."

"I'm not sure how I should take that," she replied with a demure air, her gray-blue eyes scanning over him. "That suit looks good on you."

"My blood pressure remembers," the Mirialan deadpanned, shifting on his feet. Ruka leaned close, keeping his voice low after so many chidings from the Zeltron. "Can I at least suggest we come up with some cover names?" he asked, warily eyeing a distant guard.

"That's a conversation we should've had before we got here," she tried not to hiss too loudly before recollecting her composure. "Besides, we don't need fake identities. Unless you pissed off the Hutts at some point, the only people that might even remotely recognize us are the handful of smugglers in the galaxy that remember the Red Qek from almost a decade ago." She

looked at the overflowing decadence around them and smiled. "And I doubt most of the folk I knew then have made it big enough to afford coming here."

The oddly functional logic put the Mirialan somewhat at ease with the situation, if a little curious. "Do you always use your real name for things like this?"

"Eh," she shrugged as she sipped her champagne, "half and half."

His eyes went to her jewelry, then the glass in her hand, then back to the casino floor. Guests laughed and chattered and drank. Games chimed. Cards and holoprojections shuffled across tables. A big, booming, wet laugh rolled down from a golden statue of Py'zah the Hutt, belching confetti over the top of a slot machine as credits spilled out. Staff moved between it all, bloodshed hardly a blink in the glamor. It was hard to tell if Ruka was glaring harder at the Cartel members, the various and sundry vacationers who were also likely criminals of some kind, the decor, or existence in general. Nevertheless, he exhaled a short, hard breath through bared teeth and offered Qyreia his arm.

"Alright...at your lead, my *Lady Arronen*. I don't really want even the off chance of anybody here following me back to the kids or Cor's family, though, so..." He paused. "S'pose Ruka is fine, but no last name. Or you can just call me Njegovatelj. That's my, ay, you'd call it a middle name I guess."

She blinked a couple times at that. "And people say *my* name is hard to spell. I don't even want to know what that looks like in 'besh."

Ruka chuckled thinly. "S'a reason I don't normally say it. Won't hold pronunciation against you. It's a Mirialan thing. Njegovatelj is my second name, my giving name. *Cret*. My first is my having name, *itij*. And who says your name is hard to spell?"

"People not privy to *yours*, Mister Njegova— ... whatever it was. Say it one more time?"

"*Njegovatelj*. But maybe we should stick to Ruka. You might have a point about it being easier."

"And I'd bet there's a lot more Rukas in the galaxy than Njegovateljs." She held out her elbow, which he took with a wan smile. "Now then. Shall we get down to business?"

After all, they still had a vault to find. Between the two of them, they figured that the crystals would have to be close enough to transport to any auctioning location without undue delay. Having some remote, guarded location was nice and all, but such places were harder to keep supplied and to reinforce in the case of an attack. Plus, as the former smuggler pointed out, such facilities were easy to spot from a ship with a decent enough scanner. Better to hide it close by where you already had your security concentrated, right under everyone's noses.

That Qyreia was also nominally enjoying the casino only sweetened the deal. As much as she professed it was to "look natural", Ruka couldn't help but have some doubts when she began perusing the tables. She broke *mostly* even at the dice games and then lost a handful at the roulette. When she angled toward a card table — sabaac and pazaak both occupied a richly decorated area of the casino floor — he couldn't help but get extra wary.

"Don't you think a *certain aspect* about you will give away your gambling face?"

"Why would it?" the Zeltron replied with a devious grin. "Don't forget Ru, I used to suppress the whole empathic thing and the boosted pheromones. Controlling my emotions is a walk in the park by comparison." She sidled closer, almost as though trying to snuggle into his larger form. "Besides, it's not like I'll have some *help* from a *mind reader*."

Though the Mirialan's form curved around her to accommodate her snuggling, the whisper of the words as his lips brushed the shell of her decorated ear were hardly salacious. "I told you before I'm not very good at it. They're going to feel something off when I'm looking in they heads. And you're going to feel it when I touch yours."

She nearly purred at the feel of his breath on her ear. "Even if you do one at a time?" she asked. "Not that I'd stop you *touching*."

"Cceeqa," he warned, face flushing. "We'll see, is all I'm saying. I'll try."

Ruka leaned back, tugging at his collar, smoothing his tie. Qyreia's free hand chased after him, fingers walking up his chest to pat his cheek.

"You know, you grumble," she cooed as she fidgeted with his finery, "but it's really hard to think you're *actually* upset when you use words like that."

"Words like— *words*?" the Mirialan floundered slightly. "I'm not upset, but this is not the place for your flirting jokes. Remember the gangers and the shooting?" His eyes darted around, yet again, narrowing as they swayed closer to her chosen gaming table. He indeed grumbled, very low, "I remember the gangers and the shooting."

"Preeetty sure those weren't just gangers," she muttered as she stepped up to the table to an empty seat. "Evening everyone. What's my ante?"

Fifty casino credits bought the Zeltron her hand. For all her bravado and high talk, she was hardly a born card player. She played the first couple hands straight, won and lost respectively, spending as much if not more time on appreciating the scenery than on the actual game itself. That cost her another two hands, and Ruka took that as his cue to step in. Much as he'd said, the

Mirialan Force user was hardly a master of mind-reading, or a conveyor of mental messaging. But, standing over Qyreia as her silent bodyguard, of sorts, it gave him a certain freedom to focus uninterrupted on the players and dealer at the table. Tapping into their surface thoughts was all he needed, since their cards were ever on the forefront of their minds; as though he were reading the reflections of their hands off their eyes. Only with more "*space magic*", as Qyreia called it, and less superhuman eyesight.

Rather than try and relay the entirety of the cards, Ruka merely offered simple instruction as he dipped his toes into the Zeltron's mind.

Hit.

Fold.

Call.

Slipping into her thoughts was awkward, for both of them, but somehow easier than he'd expected. She was... *receptive*. That was a good word for it. Though he wondered how much of that was because of their mutual thing they had between them, or if the mercenary's wife regularly communicated telepathically, or a bit of both; it was hard to say. But as he passed instruction along, the digital display for her credit chit showed increasingly larger numbers. Just as he was starting to sense some ill intent around the table, she broke off gaily.

"Wonderful game, everyone. Thank you so much. And," she said, pressing a little button that siphoned a respectable number of credits to the dealer, "a little something for you."

For the employee of a Hutt, the dealer was exceptionally cordial, offering a brief, light bow for the tip. "Thank you, Miss."

Qyreia held out her arm to Ruka, smiling just a little deviously. "Shall we, Mister Nern?"

"Nern?" he asked as he took the proffered limb in the crook of his elbow and led them away.

"I figured if I can't remember your damn name, I can at least do like folks do with mine. Initials." She flashed the bit of plastic and metal loaded with funds. "Remind me to get some of this to you later. College fund for the kids or something."

Ruka's expression curled at the thought of what he clearly considered ill-gotten gains, if not blood money altogether. The mention of his children gave him slight enough pause, though, and the Zeltron squeezed his arm, picking up on his discontent and an underlying, surprisingly strong surge of venom that only a handful of things evoked from the Mirialan. He put his other hand over hers on his forearm and nodded stiffly.

"We can talk about it later," he conceded. "Did you notice anything in particular, Madame Qek, or did we just hoof it before the table turned on us? I didn't get anything useful from the players there."

She angled her eyes toward a far wall. "See that door there? Almost hidden behind the wall drapes, and with the pair of security that look almost out of place with how innocuous it looks?"

The Mirialan's sharp gaze followed hers. "Yes?"

"Table across from us had someone bet their wife's jewels and lost. Got passed to the chipping desk, then quietly sent through that door, *unlike* the money transfers." She looked up at him, brows raised. *Do you get what I'm saying?*

One of his brows ticked up, and he nodded back to her. His course adjusted to guide them towards the bar nearest to the indicated far wall.

"If nothing else, it's gotta be somewhere to keep prize goods and collateral," he surmised, murmuring low. "Good job, my Lady."

"Couldn't have done it without you," she nearly chuckled, amused that it all actually worked out. "Nooow, we just need to figure out how to get through that door," she murmured, glancing casually over her shoulder, "without some suspicious party barging in."

"The hard part," Ruka muttered, and smoothly slid his arm over hers and guided her by a hand at the small of her back into a seat at the bar, pulling the chair out for her. A courtly half-bow finished the motion before he tapped at the bar top, signalling for one of the tenders.

"Yes, sir?" asked the polished Human that sidled over, eying Qyreia more readily than the Mirialan. He winked at her. Ruka's expression bared teeth.

"My Lady will have a refill, and anything else she requests."

Neither of them were masters of subterfuge, so they played their lies — or rather, Qyreia's, because Ruka was useless and couldn't lie at all — close to home. Instead of a smuggler, the Zeltron was a socialite more used to modeling her friend's fashion lines and enjoying fast-flying luxury ships than any real cutthroat crime, but she fancied expanding her horizons. Throw enough money around and she could do anything, couldn't she? And along for the ride was her dutiful bodyguard, angry at everything and paranoid of everyone and looking like he couldn't stand seeing his princess around the scum and villainy of the galaxy. It was just enough putting on airs that the ex-smuggler could pull her role off without a hitch, and enough truth that Ruka

didn't have to do anything but be mostly himself with a very tight hold on all his crime-stopping impulses.

He shot down the additional backstory of bodyguard-slash-lover, but it didn't stop Qyreia from snickering about it.

She eyed the bartender carefully, gaze bouncing to Ruka after some thought. "Maybe he knows how someone might peruse the wares of the auction that was interrupted earlier." She ran her fingers gently over the largish blue crystal that hung atop her chest, unsure which part of the view would catch the most attention.

The bartender's eyes followed her fingers, lingered until Ruka's knuckles wrapped the glass, slowly roved back up. He smiled sleekly, and nodded to the central stage area.

"Worry not, ma'am, the auction is scheduled to resume shortly. His Fatness will oversee it Himself. I assure you, we here at the Garganta can accommodate you and anything you desire until then."

He leaned forward. Some inches from his elbow, a bottle tipped over. The Human startled, managing to catch it, but forced to recoup in doing so.

Ruka didn't look terribly sorry about it.

"I'm more interested in a... *private* showing." The Zeltron fiddled with the necklace a little more. "Perhaps a trade for something a little more interesting to put on auction in its place."

At this the bartender quirked a brow, and looked more pointedly to the necklace that the Zeltron was just as pointedly fondling.

"I...see. I am afraid that acquisitions is not my particular department, madame, but I could have a message sent to the proper channels for you with the House if you wish to bargain with material wealth instead of credit lines." His gaze clocked just once, finally, to the Mirialan. "Material of any kind, of course."

"Any kind?" she hummed in return. "How cryptic. But if the auction is to start soon, then we should likewise find this acquisitions department, shouldn't we, Mister Nern?"

"At your leisure, my Lady," Ruka replied, dipping his head. He addressed the bartender. "If you could direct us?"

The other man's lips thinned, making his returning smile knife-like. He gestured for Qyreia.

"Give me but a moment to hail one of our servers, and we can have you escorted to a meeting with one of the appraisers, hmm?"

As soon as the Human turned his back to pick up a comm line embedded discreetly in the fine wood paneling of the wall behind his counter, Ruka's sneer broke into a full on scowl.

Qyreia's foot nudged him under the lip of the bar, and he could see her curious expression show the slightest tinge of worry — a subtle sign that even he could only make out after their extensive and emotionally intense time together.

What's wrong?

She just barely whispered the words from the corner of her mouth, but he could no less feel the thought from her. Almost an emotion rolling off of her, clarified by the last fingers of contact he'd kept through the Force in the wake of the card game.

Holding on to that thread, Ruka grasped it, retwining their minds if but briefly, his brows knitting from the effort as he did so. His voice then wasn't a whisper, but a hum in her head, just slightly longer than the simple indications from earlier.

He didn't just mean things to auction. Meant you could sell me.

The Mirialan's hand lifted, going to his own "necklace" for the occasion. He tapped the inactive shock collar secured around his throat, partially obscured by his suit, in indication.

Qyreia had initially snickered about that one too, lewd comments abound, even as Ruka explained in fluster that it was for practical purposes; he couldn't just carry stun cuffs in for if he needed to apprehend an opponent like he normally would, but wearing a collar in would hardly be noticed. Many of the slaves wore them. He was just one more.

It seemed that ruse was still working, as the bartender hadn't recognized the crystal the Zeltron wore for what it was. He just saw an odd piece of jewelry, not particularly special, and a possible bit of slaveflesh.

Ruka wasn't confident he could walk away or focus on the mission for this mysterious crystal if there were people in chains being paraded in front of them too, and the way the Zeltron's jaw tensed, he doubted she could either.

And here I figured he wanted to get under my dress, she mused, simmering no less for either insinuation. "Before you finish that call, tell them they may need a gem appraiser; for what I'm selling as what I might like to acquire."

Both, Ruka thought back, and didn't try to hide his snarl when the bartender turned back at Qyreia's instructions. He did, though, sever the mental connection, a migraine *pound-pound-pounding* in time to his heartbeat for the efforts — and for the other stressors, the smell of the alcohol and the roar of the crowd and machines and music, the blinding lights.

The Human looked briefly stymied at the Zeltron's words, whether for being interrupted or because he was judging her decision, it was impossible to tell. Nonetheless, he relayed her specifics and finished his call, then presented a flawlessly poison smile.

"One of our collectors will be delighted to see you in two hours' time, Madame. It is a busy schedule, you understand. If you tire of the games, I might suggest the spa, in the meantime, or one of our thirty top rated restaurants, all approves by His Fatness Himself."

Qyreia's brow quirked. "Two hours defeats the purpose of perusing in advance of the auction, now doesn't it?"

"Well now, Madame, we simply must be fair to all our guests and potential buyers," the bartender replied smoothly. "Two hours is when the next appraiser will be available. *Unless* there is some special circumstance which would require you be seen sooner, that I could communicate...?"

Her fingers twisted delicately around the gem. "I don't suppose a *kyber crystal* is quite special enough then." She shrugged. "Mister Nern, I think we can let this gentleman return to his duties," she said moving to rise from her seat.

The server's brows ticked up.

"Kyber, you say? That is a bold claim. We have had quite a few like it, Madame. Most particularly surrounding this most recent auction. His Great and Roundness would not be pleased to be insulted by any attempts at dishonesty, willful or otherwise..." He paused. "But if you are *certain* in your statements, we could certainly have the crystal examined to estimate an appropriate value."

"Do you think I would have asked for an *appraiser* if I were disingenuine?" Her hand motioned to the greater casino floor. "Someone with such refined tastes as Py'zah the Hutt wouldn't have been able to amass all this if he went on blind trust."

"As true an observation as can be, Madame." The smile stayed in place, plastique. "And the jealousy and desire His Greatness Py'zah inspires is nearly as hefty as His Fatness itself. That desire makes many act foolishly or arrogantly. Others have tried and failed to mask their intentions. We shall see if your boldness is genuine or a means to an end that will only wet our Master's appetite."

The bartender chuckled to himself and signaled with one hand. Quite suddenly, there were two suited security personnel and a demure, scantily-clad server joining them.

"Mistress Patron," the server greeted, and bowed, showing both the swell of her chest and her lekku. "This way, please."

"Shall we, Mister Nern?" Once again, he held out an elbow for the constant gentleman of a Mirialan.

"Indeed, my Lady," Ruka replied, his tone perfectly soft to her, his movements careful as he took her arm.

His gaze, though, didn't leave their escorts. His other hand flexed, left free and easy at his side in case it needed to move. Her voice dropped to a whisper.

"Would you frackin' relax? Maybe smile?"

Ruka made an expression with his face that might have been a grimace or might have been someone getting stabbed. Or, more accurately, wanting to stab someone.

"Oh my God, no, stop, nevermind, go back to glowering."

Arm in arm again, the pair were led towards the room that Qyreia had been eyeing, partially obscured by heavy drapery from most angles and with guards stationed on either side of the door, looking almost as much like part of the decor as the floating, potted plants. Unfortunately, the room itself didn't seem to be their destination, as the servant kept walking, steps dainty and hips swaying. If their gazes lingered on their target, it was only briefly, as the guards at their backs kept them moving. They went to the next door down, this one a near mirror image from the outside, and the Twi'lek bent to complete some sort of retinal scan.

There was a *beep* and a *click*, and then the door slid open.

"Please enter, Mistress, Master," she said, speaking to the floor.

"You don't have to—" Ruka began, unable to help himself, but Qyreia tugging on his arm cut him off.

Navy eyes darting to the guards, she proclaimed loudly, "*Well*, Mister Nern, escort me in."

"Yes, my Lady," the Mirialan said, bowing supremely low in contrition, and stepped through the door first to offer the Zeltron his hand, as if helping her down from a carriage.

The interior of the room was as stomach-turningly lavish as the rest of the casino, all gleaming gold, heavy silk and polished wood. It was exceptionally cooler and drier than the outer hall—rigorously temperature controlled, and very clean. Another guard stood just inside, as did a single Toydarian in his own finery, squinting through a lense at one of many pieces of jewelry. The multitude of tables held and displayed all kinds: rings, necklaces, earrings, diadems, crowns, pins, and so on, sets and individual pieces.

Qyreia didn't need to be an empath to feel the distinct uptick in Ruka's discomfort. She could hear him swallow audibly. It clicked in his throat.

"I take it this is our appraiser?" Qyreia said, as if appreciating the Toydarian's attention to his duties. Her hand gave Ruka's arm a reassuring squeeze.

"That I am," snuffled the alien, wings buzzing, not yet turning away from his work. He stuck out one gloved hand and pointed at a table that could have passed for having an inch of free space. "Well then? Give it here. I'm not sticking my face in any sweaty palms or chests or any other humie *orifices*."

"My Lady is a Zeltron," Ruka managed in a tone that was reassured-adjacent.

"Yes, yes, I can smell it from here. You're all the same to me. Jewels!" He pointed again. "Let's hope whatever you've brought me is better quality than your lippy slave, girl, or I'll have you fed to the animals just for wasting my time."

Qyreia's eyes narrowed. "Call me *girl* again and you won't get any closer to this jewel than your seat across this room." She flashed the blue crystal with a gentle nudge of her fingertip. "Now, I believe we started off on the wrong foot?"

The Toydarian's wings buzzed more ferociously, like a kicked kilik hive. He pulled his eye out of the lense to turn and glare at the Zeltron.

"Lippy girl, too," he repeated, and waved at the guards.

Three things happened very quickly then. One guard stepped forward to grab Qyreia by both shoulders. The other reached to rip the crystal off the chain that held it and the many other metal pieces. Ruka slid between them and caught one hand each. And he squeezed.

Really, both of the well-manicured thugs were bigger and broader than he was, but unfortunately for them, he had the Force to back up his grip. Also to their credit, neither showed much real sign of pain when the small bones in their hands gave way under his, besides blanching and turning red with sweat respectively. What ensued in the next few seconds was a bit like a tug-of-war between three adults who wouldn't be moved by the other and didn't have that far to

shove without knocking into something worth more than they were, but it didn't last long when Ruka's grip tightened more and drew whimpers.

"My Lady?" the Mirialan asked tersely, pressing his back to hers and, in doing so, pressing the shape of her blaster in the holster across his shoulders to her frame, just in case she chose to draw it.

A light hand on Ruka's hip served to reassure him. For the first time tonight, she let her self control slide, and her steady businesslike aura bled into simmering, intent anger.

"Mister Nern, please continue to entertain our company." Her gaze narrowed on the Toydarian and she began to slowly walk toward him. "Now, I am a woman of *business*. I came here to do *business*. So, if you all want to do business, then I am willing to overlook this little... outburst." Her steady stride carried her nearly within arm's reach of the Toydarian, hardly pausing as she snatched up a tool from his workbench. "But if this blue potato with wings calls me 'girl' one more fracking time, he's going to learn that I am a *self-made* woman and not some delicate flower." Her fingers tightened around the gemcutter's handle with clear intent. "Understood?"

At this, the Toydarian laughed, an oddly sticky sound that wavered between wet and dry as his nose bounced. He floated a few inches back from the threatening Zeltron, and folded his pristinely gloved hands.

"Oh, some spirit, she has. Perhaps you could have actually managed to obtain kyber after all, and won't be wasting our time entirely. Very well, beg forgiveness of our indiscretions...Jhev, Fekkes, you useless louts, go tend whatever's wrong with you and send the others in. If you'll call off your guard dog, Miss Businesswoman?"

"Mister Nern, if you would be so kind as to release your playmates?"

Ruka bared his teeth at both men, but did let go, shoving back with his hands and the smallest burst of telekinesis that wouldn't be overly noticed— enough to send both larger guards stumbling back a good foot of space between them, where he might not have been able to do so otherwise without more obvious Force augmentation. The Humans curled their broken hands to their chests in similar poses, eyes all venom and itching for blasters, but retreated when the Toydarian hollered at them again. His raised voice made the Twi'lek flinch.

Ruka backed towards the center of the room, chasing Qyreia, as the guard changed. The two that had been standing outside came in instead, a massive Devoarian and another Twi'lek, but this one a burlier male. The Hutt sure seemed to keep his employees typecast.

Only once he was touching the Zeltron's arm again did the Mirialan straighten up from what had been an instinctive sort of stance, half-turned and braced. Whether for show or not, the palm she

pressed between his shoulder blades, petting down his back for a second, around the concealed weapons, did succeed in lowering his hackles ever so slightly.

"Well at least it listens," huffed the jeweler, and rolled his eyes. He extended his little hand. "Come now, then, Madame. You claim to bring kyber. Let us see."

"Yes, of course," the Zeltron said, smoothing out her own tone as things came back to a semblance of normalcy for the moment. It felt good to be back within arm's reach of her blaster again too. She undid the specific clasp on the gem and set it gently on the table. "There you are. One kyber crystal."

The Toydarian snatched up the crystal without much further fuss, sticking his lense back into his eye and examining the gem through it. He gave a pleased set of snorts.

"Hmmm...this does *look* genuine...but the real tests involve resonance and seeing what sort of conductivity it has..."

Ruka made a little pained noise in the back of his throat. He looked desperately like he wanted to snatch the crystal back, and maybe like he was going to be sick the more the jeweler handled it.

His mental voice strained to tap against the door of her mind, like a voice too quiet in a storm.

It will explode if he...does...too much...

Qyreia's eyes flinched back toward Ruka for half a heartbeat before returning to the Toydarian. "Please take care not to over-test it," she said with a respectful air to the appraiser. "Not to question your intelligence. Just that I had a smaller sample before that was... mishandled."

The alien shot her an appraising look as he poked the lense away. "Hmmm. Further credit to your claim, that, if you've genuinely tried to sell kyber before to less esteemed individuals. Magnificent little crystals, but very *volatile*."

Wings buzzing, he bobbed over a few other tables and then hovered before a set of metal drawers. Extracting some odd tool from one, he returned to his place under a light and began fiddling with the crystal.

Ruka practically vibrated in place next to Qyreia. His eyes danced between the Zeltron, the guards, the servant, and the cameras visible in each corner of the room. He brushed her fingers with the back of his hand, indicating them with a glance.

I know man, I know. Just... chill for a second. If he gives us the green light, we can walk right into wherever they're keeping the goods.

She didn't know how much of that got through to him. When she did the telepathy thing with her wife, Keira, they had a personal connection that made it easier to talk between them. While she and Ruka were good friends, this method of communication between them was hardly a well-used comm channel. She even felt a little bad for him, given the strain it was likely putting him under.

"I appreciate you and your company's time in looking into this on such a short notice," she said to their appraiser. "After the last auction's fiasco, you can probably understand why I want to handle this a little more... *delicately*, I think is a good word."

"Yes, yes, of course," the Toydarian muttered, distinctly more interested in what he was doing than what Qyreia was saying. "And all that bloody disgusting ruckus over a few mineral rocks off a dirtball of a planet. Not even kyber. Not like this beautiful little specimen..."

Ruka's eyes widened, his spine snapping straight. He looked to Qyreia, whose face was struggling to contain surprise, mouthing, *not kyber?*

Because if the crystals they had come to collect weren't kyber, as suggested by what little intelligence their respective resources had, then that left to question what they were and why both parties valued them so much. At least kyber had been understandable. The Collective had been using kyber shards to build superweapons, and to build the terrifying hive mind soldiers they had brought to Arx.

"Speaking of," she interjected, noting Ruka's expression as she worked to keep a straight face herself, "perhaps once you've gotten your value estimate, we can make our perusal? That was the intent I relayed to the bartender."

"Ah yes, your *intents*." Finally the jeweler put aside his latest tool and set the crystal down on a square of pristine cloth, folding it over top, as if to be shortly tucked away. "I do not know if you are more familiar with pawn brokers, Madame, or what ilk were ignorant enough to explode your previous sample, but we are a...upstanding sort of establishment. Deals aren't made in minutes and handshakes, here. His Fatness trusts His business to be done properly. I can give you a market estimate for this piece, but it will not be the House's offer; that will only come at the end of the business week, once all acquisitions have been thoroughly vetted and exchanges agreed upon. There IS a reason this casino is a *hotel*, you know. You have several options. We will accept this kyber and see you sorted with this week's other intake, for which you will receive an appropriate credit sum, or if there is a specific item you wish to bid upon, we will ensure you a seat at that auction with the crystal as your collateral. If that does not suit you, you could offer

some other collateral," he gestured to Ruka, then to the Twi'lek servant, "though I am not a stock appraiser. And if still none of those suit you, well, we will have no more to discuss, now will we?"

Qyreia sighed, eyes rolling incredulously. "Two steps forward, one step back." She held out her hand. "It seems there was a great deal of miscommunication up to now. My crystal, if you would."

"A shame, Madame. I took you for a businesswoman," replied the Toydarian, and waved a pudgy hand. "Get—"

"—down!" Ruka barked, one hand shoving the Zeltron's shoulders low as he bent them both double, a blaster bolt flying overhead from behind. He leapt backwards in the same breath, slamming feet-first into the male Twi'lek and yanking the gun out of the Devorian's grip with a telekinetic pull.

The jeweler squawked, starting to yell for the guards he'd dismissed, but Qyreia was faster. She wound her arm back and *slammed* the carving tool she still held into the 'blue potato's' jaw, spinning him around in midair with the force of the blow and spraying blood. He dropped like a smacked fly, heavy to the richly carpeted floor.

"*Fraaack*, Ruka, time for Plan Besh!"

"Working— on it—" grunted the Mirialan, having gotten into an unfortunate grapple with the Devorian that was currently trying to choke him out. The other guard at least was down, and the server was cowering tight under one of the tables.

With the Toydarian out of the way momentarily, Qyreia grabbed the crystal and looked for a weapon more suited to her tastes. Her eyes fell on the dropped blaster from her compatriot's opening moves in the fracas, and she made quickly for the gun.

"Ruka, she called as she scooped it up, "turn him!"

The Mirialan couldn't do much against the burly Devaronian, but a simple twist he could manage. His sidestep earned him a jabbed knee to his side that might have had him doubled over if the weight of it was restricted by their proximity. That, and as soon as their bodies were turned, the guard was in full view of Qyreia's sights. The blaster lanced blue across the room and took the horned man in the temple. As Ruka was released from the slumping dead man's grip, he looked over to see the Zeltron perusing the gloves of her dress.

"I swear to fracking god, if that little karking sleemo ass-monkey got any blood on this thing, I will make his death slow and painful." She looked up to see Ruka staring and she tossed him his lightsaber crystal. "All yours. You can take my 'necklace' too."

The Sith caught it out of the air and clutched it to his chest. His short, fervent sigh of relief was borderline *intense*, like sinking into a hot bath after a long day, or less pure activities.

"Thank kriff," he muttered. "S'like that franger had my heart in his hands. You I could handle, but that, ugh." There might have been more to say, and another time, since it was her, he might have shared it— but they had business to be doing, and time was *not* on their side. "Hold still."

Adept as he was, Ruka didn't even need to gesture to telekinetically grip all the Zeltron's 'jewelry.' Apart, the pieces had all looked a strange, industrial sort of chic, with metal bits and pieces short and long, curved and straight, circular and sharp. Some had been small enough to pass for clip-on earrings, while the largest had made a unique little belt to match the necklace and accessories. Then, they all floated off her person and over to the Mirialan where they hovered a moment.

He opened his palms, letting the crystal rise to join the rest of the parts, and then wove his fingers in a complex motion, brows furrowing a moment. The pieces all danced together and slotted into place, suddenly recombined into the perfect whole of a lightsaber and sealing once more. Ruka gripped it with promise, steadier now, then looked around the room.

Only seconds had passed, but they would be precious. Two guards, down. The dealer, down. The server—

Ruka stilled, then gentled, his stance and expression loosening. He undid his cuffs and pulled off his suit jacket, then slowly crouched and knee-walked over to the Twi'lek.

"Hey," he called, soft. "We're not gonna hurt you, okay? My name's Ruka. Here. You can have my jacket. It's kinda chilly in here, ay? You seemed cold." Hesitatingly, the woman took the offered article and clutched it to her chest, staring at the two with frightened eyes. Ruka looked a little helplessly over his shoulder, expression grim. "Look, please. Just hang on a minute. We gotta get something and then we can go, yeah? If you don't wanna stay here."

Her eyes went to the guards, the cameras, Ruka's collar, Qyreia.

"She needs to decide now if she's coming with us or staying here." Qyreia beckoned with her hand. "In the meantime, can I get *my* weapon now?"

Ruka rolled his eyes and, with hardly a motion, floated the firearm over to the Zeltron's waiting hand. The DL-44 always looked a little oversized for her, and even more so now in her finery. But she also looked more like herself; the Qyreia that Ruka knew so well.

He couldn't help but roll his eyes again when she started jokingly cooing to her piece. "Oh hello, baby, did you miss mommy?"

"You done?"

"Shh, don't let the big green man worry you." Her amused smirk was almost too much. "He just got his B.O.B. back, and you shoulda seen his faaace."

Ruka's deadpan expression was all the amusement and answer she needed.

"Okay, just wait one sec," she said, turning toward the Toydarian. "I got a score to settle here." She walked briskly over to the alien who was just barely coming to from her earlier wallop. "Morning sunshine."

"You do that," Ruka sighed, and looked to the Twi'lek again. "What do you say, ay? You wanna get out of here? We can take you somewhere safe, if you don't got nobody..."

But the server only shook her head and whimpered, tucking up tighter in a ball while she hugged the jacket. Ruka sighed, but stood. If their help wasn't wanted, then it couldn't be forced. He went to quickly lock the door from the inside, then about examining one wall.

"Pretty sure this one is the one shared with that room. What's your pal say?"

Said pal was groaning as Qyreia toed him with her heel. The Toydarian muzzily clutched at his snout and face, moaning and sniffing, blood staining his gloves.

"You better start talking and answering my friend's questions." She pointed her pistol at the Toydarian. "Or do you wanna try and call my bluff again?"

"I... don't know whatjoo want," he replied through his blood-choked nostrils.

"I want the codes."

"Wha—? Whadbh codhez?"

"The code to the air shield. The frack do you think?! How do we get into the vault?"

The Toydarian paused, glancing at the security camera in the nearest corner. It only gave Qyreia time to turn her gun up and, *one-two-three-four*, shot out every one of them before pressing the pistol to the appraiser's head.

"Now I am not above doing this slow and painful with a sharp object." Her eyes glanced around the various tools and acquired belongings. "And I have quite the selection. So..."

"I gedh it, I gedh ith. Ugh. Idh... It's through the other door, outside."

"Is it on the other side of the wall like my friend said?"

"The... hall is, yes. But there's no way in unless you break down the wall." He looked her over, the same disgusted scrutiny as before. "And unless you're hiding explosives somewhere in that dress..."

"It's through that wall, Ru," Qyreia called over her shoulder.

"I'm on it."

"You said 'hall'," Qyreia continued as Ruka squared up with the wall, focusing his will against the duracrete. A satisfying spiderweb of cracks burst in the previously smooth surface, deepening more and more with each passing moment. "What hall is that?"

The Toydarian's eyes went a little wider at the display. "It'd's where the vaults are."

"And those red crystals?"

"Why would you want...?"

"Which..." She pressed the muzzle hard against his head. "...vault?"

"V-very end of the line. Security doors. Thick ones."

"And the codes?" The wall behind her snapped and cracked even harder as Ruka fought through the thick construction.

"I don't know them."

She pressed the muzzle harder to his blue-tinted scalp. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm karking sure! Now I told you what you want to know!"

"You also tried to get us shot in the back and had me throttled." The merc stood and stepped back before unceremoniously shooting the Toydarian in the groin. "If Py'zah the Fracked asks, tell him the Red Qek wasn't fond of this warm welcome of yours."

Before the appraiser could manage a response through his pained screams, she turned the power dial to stun and shot him again, leaving him slumped on the ground with the stink of seared flesh wafting over him. She made quick work to join Ruka, pausing momentarily to watch the slave girl.

"How we doing over here?"

"Feels like less resistance, something's about to give. Might wanna hold your breath and back up if you don't want dust on your dress," the Mirialan replied. He couldn't look away from his task, the whole of him fixed forward in concentration, but his eyebrows did cinch. "Did you really have to make sure the Hutt Lord DID hear of you?"

Paneling had already snapped and cracked, and the spiderwebbing that spread from the epicenter of his assault from floor to ceiling was raining plaster and paint, wood warping before it too gave with deep crunching sounds. There weren't pipes in this wall, for which he was glad, pressing and pressing and *pressing* and—

All at once everything gave, collapsing, blown inward and outward as the telekinetic hammer carried on into the hall the Toydarian had indicated. Ruka leapt through the debris with saber in hand, trusting his senses to alert him of any attack, automated or otherwise.

"Do you know what kind of digging he's gonna hafta do to get any information of substance on that?" She practically chuckled as she stepped through the freshly made opening. "I was *not* famous with that name."

"Well you're *making* yourself famous," Ruka countered as the door to their left beeped, the lock disengaging from the other side, and the two guards that had been rotated out earlier barged through. Lifting a hand from his unlit saber hilt, the Mirialan merely yanked them through the air and directly past the pair, throwing them full-tilt into the opposite doors. They slammed into what was, as the Toydarian had warned, durasteel, and promptly crumpled. The Sith stalked over to the still-open doorway, keyed the panel to close it again, and then pressed his palm to the controls. Lightning arced in a short burst, frying the electronics. "And much as I think you deserve all the praises, crovja, can it not be from some Hutt franger putting out a bounty for you, ay?"

"I dunno, man," she mused, watching him work. "I feel like after the day they've had so far, this'll hardly be on their radar."

Ruka tilted his head in consideration, turning around and advancing down the hall again, looking for cameras as he came to a stop next to his cinnabar partner.

"Point," he conceded, then pointed up. "Get those? It's gonna take a minute to cut through that damn door, and I'm betting we're gonna have company soon."

"I got you covered," she replied with a quietly confident air.

There were more cameras than might've been expected, given the length of the hall, but it was no less a simple task. What really had the merc's attention was in trying to find cover in another long, straight hallway; especially without getting in Ruka's way as he steadily cut through the vault door with his lightsaber.

"Hey," Qyreia called, gaze clocking between Ruka's form, muscles straining under his white shirt as plasma challenged durasteel of an unknown thickness, and the door and their breach point respectively. "Do you think you could grab some of those tables real quick, make a barricade?"

"Mmmmyeah, one...sec..." grunted the Sith, pushing in and up and cresting one half of a roughly head-height arch. He deactivated the blade rather than pull it out, and huffed, turning. "Good idea—"

A faint beep sounded in the appraisal room, then a shout. Both of them tensed, and Qyreia's blaster came up, aimed, and fired a salvo through the decimated wall without much more thought. It didn't really matter if she hit anything or who was there; they needed covering fire and time was up.

"Hurry up!" she belted, free hand snatching up her long, shimmering skirts and hiking them higher so she could quickly retreat. She put her shoulder to one wall and listened to the pounding of footsteps and Ruka's sudden string of cursing as he thrust the saber back in.

The casino guards came in force, albeit with numbers that trickled into the far room in a steady stream. With the opening fusillade to tell them there was an active shooter, they knew enough to take cover rather than simply rounding the bend into the long hall. Through the hiss-and-pop of the lightsaber's metalworking, they could make out some mumbled planning from the guards.

The first popped out to provide covering fire, only to find his chest becoming intimate with a red bolt of energy a split second later. Qyreia was watching, and her patience mixed well with the rush of the second guard who had anticipated a suppressed enemy, only to find himself out in the open and his covering fire gone an instant before he too was struck down. The Zeltron's eyes danced briefly and anxiously over her partner's work as she readied herself for the next attack.

"Rukaaa," she mumbled through her teeth as she pressed tight to the wall for even a semblance of cover, "how much longerrr?"

"Kriff it," snapped the Mirialan, high and tight with tension and keenly aware of the firefight at his back his partner was currently holding off. The crude "doorway" was almost done, but not almost enough; half of the whole left half still waited to be cut, nevermind the portion at their feet. "Brace!"

Deactivating his saber again, the Sith stepped back, gauged their enemies' movements, then chambered his arm and pistoned it forward as if to punch the durasteel wall.

Instead, a sledgehammer of telekinetic force barreled the scant space between knuckles and molten, sawed-into metal like a tidal wave, carrying momentum. The scream of rending steel ripped sharply through the air as the wall exploded inward along the sliced seams, bending and warping where it was still attached. Air and flecks of cooling-liquid shrapnel blasted back towards them in turn, but Ruka's body made a quick shield for Qyreia's as they both pressed against the hallway interior. Klaxons blared from somewhere on the other side of the rent, lopsided opening, but it was *open*, however crudely.

"Go, go, go," Ruka gasped, a few red blotches blooming under his white linens and the security forces poking muzzles out after having reeled back from the impromptu and strange *boom*. It hasn't been a bomb, and that alone seemed to be confusing them.

"*You go, schutta!*" she belted as she shoved him toward the hole, hurling rounds at the casino guards while they bolstered themselves enough to do likewise. *Not like I'm looking forward to going through the still-very-hot metal gash there.* Despite her efforts, Ruka spent precious seconds playing at chivalry when, really, he was physically in her way, and it was simply safer for them both to get in.

Several cajoling shoves and as many near-misses by the guards' blasters was clue enough. Ruka lurched through the opening, with his dress-laden partner close behind.

Through to the other side, the pair immediately took cover, pressing into the other side of the wall where there wasn't slag or blasterfire. There was little enough pause to actually look around the room; the shots were still coming, more now that Qyreia wasn't actively shooting back.

Hissing out a breath between clenched teeth, the Mirialan grew still a second in concentration, inhaling sharply, once. His eyes went gold, veins bulging under them, and he whirled back into the opening in the heartbeat between blaster shots, lifting both hands as sparks leapt in his palms. Electricity arced in thick spindles and caught the first advancing guards, the ones he could see, the current jumping from one to another to another, reaching for each living body behind the next; even back into the room beyond his sightlines, without losing any power. The stench of burning flesh and cloth and hair filled the hallway, and Ruka's expression was grim when he stopped the assault after a few seconds.

But the Sith still wasn't done, because they surely wouldn't be safe but a moment, not with more guards on the way and that open avenue at their backs. Again he reached out, and, flowing with the motion with his whole body, like a wave, seemed to drag something through the air. The durasteel of the wall that had been bent and blasted out screeched and groaned yet again, folding back in on itself. This was much cruder, none of the craftsmanship the Mirialan had as a carpenter applicable; just using the Force to bend the 'sheets' back into place, like propping up a doorway knocked off its frame. Certainly, an enterprising guard could perhaps jam the barrel of a blaster through the thin gaps, but no one was getting through or moving the section again.

Gasping, Ruka let go and sank to one knee, silhouetted by the still-burning, resealed archway.

"...dammit," the man muttered, and coughed, wiping a smear of blood that dribbled from his nose. "You good?"

Panting lightly, Qyreia looked over herself and nodded. "I'm good. You?" Her eyes pointedly looked at the blossoms of red in his otherwise white shirt.

"Fine," he responded, then pushed himself to his feet. A hand to his head belied the statement slightly, but he ignored it with a grimace. "Good thing I'm really used to migraines in places like this."

Turning, the Mirialan scanned the newly revealed 'vault,' knowing Qyreia was doing the same. A few quick shots from the former mercenary took out the visible cameras on the interior too, clockwork and ruthless: *point, pull, shoot*. One more silenced the screeching alarm above the door.

The room itself was sparser than others, but still lavish, probably repurposed after being built. The rugs underfoot were pure red, a few shades darker and deeper than the Zeltron's skin, and filigree and scrollwork lined the walls, save where they'd broken through. The floor was pure marble, and the only door was the ruined one behind them. Tables, shelves, and chests of drawers line the barren space, some with glass tops, and all seemingly closed tight.

"Okay. Crystals. Crystals crystals crystals..." The Zeltron started going to the lock boxes inset into the wall, only to unsurprisingly find them locked, much like their namesake suggested. "Uhhh... Hey Ru, you wouldn't happen to be able to slice all these bad boys open, would you? Little laser sword action?" she said, adding a little swoosh with her finger for theatrics.

That gesture got a small chuckle from the Mirialan, and he approached, lighting his blade again.

"Yeah, sure, ay. Hope I don't break anything..." Carefully, nose scrunching, Ruka regarded the boxes before shrugging. He stood back and brought just the tip of the laser sword to the locks, pressing in about an inch and cutting to each side before withdrawing and repeating the

process, not unlike an oversized letter opener. When he was done with one set, he stood clear, offering Qyreia the way. "That work? Or think I'm just gonna need to hack 'em all open?"

"Leeet's take a look and find out, hm?"

She moved past the Mirialan, smirking and only faintly wary of the wrenched-shut piece of door in case of any ambitious guards. Her dress gloves were slipped off and she started rifling through the opened boxes. Each one had something different, unique, and most importantly: valuable. Each time though, as she worked her way to the back of each box, she merely shifted the goods aside, disappointed in the lack of crystals, and moved on to the next box. Outside they could hear footsteps and broken voices from the guards that had dared to approach the door and discover its current condition.

Ruka was glad for the temporary respite, looking around with equal parts disdain and awe at the decadent decorations. As his eyes scanned across the walls of secured boxes, he felt an inexorable tug at the back of his mind; one that drew his gaze to a container across the room from Qyreia. His feet drew him closer, at once of his own accord and yet feeling so disconnected from the conscious effort, until he was right in front of the box that so fervently called his attention. It felt almost as though it whispered to him, quietly nagging and pulling him deeper and deeper in.

"Hey Ru, I don't thi— Where did he?" Qyreia looked around, certain there were no crystals in the opened containers, only to see her friend stone still, staring at the opposite wall. "Ruka?"

His lack of response had her stepping quickly but carefully over to his side, fingers flexing nervously on the pistol grip.

"Ruka?" She reached out to touch him. "You there, hot stuff?"

As soon as her fingertips reached his shoulder, he shuddered and blinked, as if waking up suddenly from a dream. The jolt gave the Zeltron a jerk of her own, and the pistol nearly came up until she saw life come back into the Force user's eyes.

"W-wha? Yeah, yeah, I hear you, *crovja*." He looked warily at the box he'd been staring at. "I think it's in here."

Qyreia sighed. "After all that, I'm not about to argue with you."

"Stand back."

Once again, Ruka's lightsaber burst to life, and the Zeltron had no sooner taken a step back than he began to slice his way into the lockbox. The door of the container fell with a *thunk* to the floor, revealing inside a box that they remembered from the images and vids of the original auction.

"I'm fairly certain that's them," Ruka sighed, sounding almost nervous simply from looking at it.

"I think you're right."

Qyreia lifted her delicate purse — a fancy silken thing that could loop around one wrist or hang from her belt without effort and barely fit a lipstick tube and compact — and pulled it open, reaching for the crystals that *were* rather *hypnotic* and pretty with a last cautious look at the Mirialan.

"I—" Ruka stuttered, hesitated, and the Zeltron paused.

"What is it, Ru?" Her words came out a little harsh with tension, and she gentled them. "What's wrong?"

"I dunno, I just. I just have a bad. Feeling. About those things. It. They." He fidgeted. It was like he was twitching forward even though he took another step back. No— *holding himself back*, she surmised. "It's like. It's like it's *singing* to me? You— you can't *hear that*? If I stop focusing for even a second...I can almost..." Another step back. He bumped into a table and stopped.

"M-maybe we shouldn't."

"Say no more." The purse — something she picked up solely to grab the goods — went to the floor. One less thing to carry or get caught on something. What might have been more surprising was how she raised her pistol to the crystals. "We may wanna take cover... or something. But we're not having any more mind-controly karkery like we had on Selen. I am *done* with that."

Ruka's smile was appreciative as he stepped to the side of the box to avoid any shrapnel, with Qyreia following suit. "All on you."

"Ladies first," she chuckled with a grin as she squeezed the trigger.

A crimson blaster bolt fired off, a bloom of bright relief and vindication, but as the pair leaned back around to observe the smoldering ground, they beheld the crystals still there in the blackened scorch of the rug, perfectly intact. Their respectively grateful and confident grins fell.

"Whaaaaat the FRACK. Oh, no you don't, schutta," Qyreia vowed, glaring at the things and firing again, the brief plasmic flash highlighting Ruka's paling expression of dread. Again, while the floor blackened further, and the stink of ozone rose, the crystals stayed.

Gritting her teeth, the Zeltron fired *again*, finger holding down the trigger this time, letting her blaster spit a brief barrage. She nearly let out a shout of steadily growing frustration when the damn shards sank into the growing, fiery hole in the ground but didn't seem more damaged than a bit of scorching.

Behind her, the Sith swore, extending his own weapon, the saber lit.

"Here," he choked out. "Try that."

The Zeltron grabbed the lit hilt, not entirely unfamiliar with the sensation of a weightless blade courtesy of her spouse, but felt no less weird as she turned it in her hands. *Eat poodoo and die, schutta*. She *crammed* the blade into the crystal, finding it resistant but not impervious in the face of constant and continued pressure by the high energy beam. After several seconds and the start of a sheen of sweat on her brow, her efforts were rewarded by the sweet sound of one of the crystals snapping, a deep fissure running through its whole length.

"It's working," she growled through her teeth.

What she didn't see or hear was the Mirialan nearby wavering in his stance. His knees buckled briefly before righting himself. He hurt. Not his chest or his legs or his head. It was as though his entire being was sent through a pure shock of pain at the first crack. When the first crystal broke entirely, Ruka was overwhelmed.

"Aaaaagh!"

"Ruka?" Qyreia looked down at her handiwork, then at him. *Frack*. "I'm sorry, Ru," she said as she readied for another stab. "It's for your own good."

The point of the lightsaber came down on the crystals again, and the screaming resumed.

Ruka hit the floor. Grabbed his head, even though it didn't help; no where he put his hands did. He just curled in on himself, screaming and convulsing, trying his hardest just to hold still and bear it.

The second crystal shattered and so did his spine and his skull but he was perfectly whole, there crumpled on his knees. Sweat poured down his brows and made his bloodied shirt blanch and stick.

"Do it," he gasped out, words sawed-edged, strangled. "D-do it, *doitdoitdoit*, frang, Qyreia, *please—*"

Whether he was begging her to stop or hurry at that point wasn't clear, but it didn't matter. She knew what she needed to do and she knew he trusted her to do it, even if she had to lock her jaw against his his screaming made her skin crawl.

"Just a few more," she promised, not sure he heard. Ruckus on the other side of the ruined breach had her swearing an impressive streak longer at the crystals, the Hutt, the job, and whatever Force-involved karkery was at hand.

Between Ruka's suppressed screaming and the noise outside, the Zeltron was growing increasingly worried that *something* was going to happen and soon. The external chatter prattled even louder, and Qyreia decided the Hutt crew had been allowed enough peace.

"Will you **shuuut up?!**" she belted, letting up on the crystals and charging toward the rent and resealed door.

Thank god I'm not wearing heels, she thought as she crossed the room in a matter of strides, ignoring Ruka on the ground along the way. She spied one of the larger gaps in the metal and, using her forward momentum for a little extra *oomph*, jammed the blade through to the other side of the vault door. There was an audible gurgling grunt from the other side that was soon followed by the smell of burning flesh as she twisted the beam of energy. There was a searing hiss and gentle tug on the hilt as, not specifically known to Qyreia, the guard fell to the ground before the blade could be properly removed.

The sound of feet dashing away and out of reach followed immediately after, and the Zeltron withdrew the blade back inside. She turned back to the little pile of crystals, seeing Ruka in his pitiable state, and approached with a sour mood. *I'm really sorry, Ruka.*

With an angry yowl, she brought the point of the lightsaber down on the crystals again.

The Sith's throat gave out sooner than the crystals did. Somewhere in his spasming he shifted from bent double to over and ended up on his back, silently screaming to the apotheosis of, presumably, Py'zah the Hutt above. Why a vault would need such decor was anyone's guess; some scattered, pinging part of his brain imagined a spiteful painter had picked this room to do it in just so nobody would have to see the thing.

His frayed attention was still fixed upward, vision blurred out by tears, when he felt it as Qyreia destroyed the last of the crystals, like he was ripping apart, and then all of a sudden—

Nothing.

It just stopped. Just like that.

The Mirialan panted, each great lungful of air through his abused throat like cherry-hot nails and smashed glass. His head was pounding, and his fingertips stung and twinged from where he'd been scrabbling at the floor. All his muscles ached. Exhaustion chased every twitch. But the rest was...fine.

Bonelessly, he glanced over to see Qyreia blinking her own eyes furiously and stomping on the crystalline ashes for good measure. It made his cracked lips pull in an adoring smile.

"It...stopped," he croaked, and cringed to hear his own voice. *Rough*. "G...good...job."

Qyreia looked up from the remnants and shards toward Ruka. No sooner had she seen him than she immediately fumbled with the lightsaber to deactivate the weapon, dropping it as she rushed over to him. Tears were already on the edges of her eyes when she put her arms around Ruka and held him close.

"I'm so sorry, Ruka. I'm sorry."

"...ey...now, shhh-sh-shh. S'not...you're fault...no tears, *my beautiful girl*." He lifted an arm to cover one of her hands squeezing his shoulders and squeezed back. "S'like y'always say...stupid *wooshy* stuff, right? Blame 'em. You did good."

Admittedly, not moving again for a couple hours and curling up with her would have been nice. It was nice right then to be held. But they didn't have time for that and they both knew it. He squeezed her hand again.

"Hey, ay...you think we can get out that way or...?" Ruka nodded to the entrance where she'd stabbed someone with his saber.

Qyreia looked up and her eyes widened in realization. "Aaand I left a big fat hole there excuse me."

Reluctantly, she slipped out of Ruka's arms and dashed to the door, noting some muffled sounds beyond. She pressed the muzzle of her pistol to the earlier hole she'd bored through the metal and fired off several rounds. While it was hard to tell if she hit anyone, it clearly still managed to spook the guards and the shuffling of feet increased several fold.

She turned back to Ruka, looking a little more ragged than before. "I'm not sure this is the best route. Least not without a solid fight."

"I...might have an idea," he offered as he sat up, wiping at his face and massaging his temple. He pointed up, at the ceiling that he'd been beholding. "Willing to bet that's not durasteel. Lookit the walls on either side of the door we cut through. They ain't any thicker than the entryway."

Certainly not thick enough to be bearing the kind of load a durasteel ceiling would have. And there's no extra support beams or struts you'd need either. You asked me to build a place like this and put that heavy of a roof on, I'd tell you it'd come down." The Mirialan scratched at the spot where his ear had once been. "Can probably cut us a hole out."

Qyreia blinked from the doorway, unsure about Ruka's assessment, given just moments ago he was a screaming wreck. Besides that, she had no idea he had any construction work in his background; a lot of those stories got muddled when they hung out, if they were discussed at all. Plus, this was a vault. If someone could just cut through the walls or ceiling – which might lead to any number and kinds of rooms – then that would be a poor design choice among so many other hyper-cautious design choices.

But she wasn't about to say 'no' to ideas. "Uhh... sure? Can't hurt to try."

"If it don't work," he reasoned, catching the doubt in her tone, "we can try something else. Worst case, run that gauntlet." The Mirialan's tired gaze went to the door and the Zeltron, and he pushed himself up with a grunt of effort. He grabbed his discarded saber from the crystal mess and backed up towards one wall. "C'mere. You'll wanna hug a wall and better one where they ain't shooting."

So said, Qyreia shot a last, careful glance through the available gaps in the door, blaster at the ready, and then darted over to join Ruka – if nothing else, just in case he fell over. While it wasn't really necessary, the Sith opened one arm almost automatically, and the mercenary slid in, pressing side to side and shoulder to shoulder, into each other and back against the far wall as Ruka looked up.

"Gotta admit," Qyreia began, brow quirking as she finally got an eyeful of rolls and rolls of Hutt backlit by golden clouds and crowned in jewels, many figures prostrate before him, "this could be satisfying."

Ruka snorted, then launched his lightsaber from his hand. The plasma pinwheeled like a buzzsaw into the ceiling, spitting sparks where it struck, a moment of resistance as they held their breath.

Then, it sank in – up? Through? – deep, faster than it had when carving through the thick durasteel. It wasn't instantaneous, clearly still shearing through lots of material, but it was cutting persistently.

The Mirialan's will and quick motions of his fingers guided the weapon, making four overly long cuts and then returning to his palm. A telekinetic grasp yanked down a sliced section of ceiling, blooming dust and plaster and wood and metal, the painted facade decimated. They coughed, but it wasn't terrible, exactly.

"Bit more to go," he said, squinting, and repeated the process. More ceiling — and floor? Floor of the above floor — got carved out and yanked down, like a slow, deliberate collapse. Finally, light and music burst through along with another cloud of debris, and the sound of surprised shrieking and chatter filtered down. When the pair approached to peer cautiously up through the hole, blaster and blade raised respectively, they caught an eyeful of another couple peering back at them, dressed in plush bathrobes and evidently having been in the middle of... something...given there didn't seem to be much else underneath, from this angle.

"Uh. Sorry?" Ruka offered.

The woman screamed and fled. Her paramour — or, apparently, *paramours* — were quick on her heels.

"Well," the Zeltron chuckled as she glanced between Ruka and the sight above, "now I actually kinda feel bad."

Ruka rolled his eyes as he moved toward the pancaked and broken layers of construction on the floor. "You would."

"Whaaat? It's just in bad taste to interrupt *that*."

Her partner grinned as he offered a hand to pull the Zeltron up. "Oh no, how horrible. They'll have to resend all the invitations. The catering was already paid for. What *would* the press say?"

"Ha," she shot back with sarcasm so thick that even the Mirialan flinched as he reached out with the Force to lift her up to the next floor.

"Sorry. I'm not *trying* to judge."

Qyreia looked down at him, grinning and rolling her eyes as she reached down to offer him a hand up. "You are forgiven."

Ruka merely leapt up through the hole, skirting just past the Zeltron and gusting her with the breeze he left in the wake of his movement. She looked up at him through her ruffled coiffure, blowing some out of her face and realigning the rest with her hand before pulling out her gloves and donning them once more.

Ruka's gaze clocked around their new surroundings, searching, but there weren't obvious threats or legions of armed guards like down below outside the violated vault. It was just a suite of some kind.

An incredibly rich, large, fancy suite. They were standing in a bathroom probably the size of the main hangar area-slash-hang out area of Qyreia's YT-1300. The jacuzzi tub, big enough for a bantha, was full and bubbly and wine glasses and various accoutrements laid abandoned and scattered— along with a lot of clothes. He poked his head out into them next room and saw a massive bedroom, with a sprawling bed that the guests were hiding behind and under, the poor guys, and beyond that yet more rooms. Probably a main area and kitchen and who knew what.

One of the hotel guests noticed him and squeaked, diving into a walk in closet.

"Don't hurt us!"

"Uh," Ruka fumbled for a moment. "We're... housekeeping. Just. Doing some. Ahem. Maintenance?"

Behind him, he heard the Zeltron groan.

"Don't worry, folks," Qyreia called through the door reassuringly, her pistol held behind her back to hide her armament. "There's been an incident in the casino, and we're currently looking into it. Please just stay in your room here and you'll be notified on the comm when everything is safe."

Ruka looked at her curiously, only to be sorted out when she cleared her throat insistently. "Y-yes. Please just stay in here. We will have the situation under control shortly."

One of the nude participants stared at them with a scrutinous glare. "You don't look like hotel security."

Ruka muttered under his breath, "*Sche kabron se mohleysta poojta.*"

Qyreia seemed to falter for a moment, only to wave the comment off dismissively. "Not all of his Fatness' agents are in uniform."

"So you're undercover security?" the naked man asked again.

"Yes," Ruka shot back, picking up what the Zeltron was putting down, "and every minute we spend here explaining to you what is going on, that is more time for the uh... *terrorists* to get away."

The woman gasped. "Like the ones at the auction?"

"Yes, we think so," the Mirialan replied, almost getting into the facade before a touch of Qyreia's hand brought him back. "Ahem. We will have hotel staff call once the situation is handled. Until then: door shut and locked."

"Y-yes *sir*," the woman said, shushing her more skeptical partners as she stepped out from behind the bed, leaving absolutely nothing to the imagination as she approached the door controls. She paused and quite overtly looked the Mirialan up and down. "Please, when you've caught them, we would love to show you our... *appreciation*."

"Yes, thank you ma'am," Qyreia said as she shut the door for her. "And remember to lock it." She jerked her head toward the door and practically pulled Ruka toward the exit. "Maybe remember to use protection too, vapid fracking schutta."

"That," Ruka muttered, as they nearly burst into the hall and shut the door behind them, hearing the mechanisms, thankfully, bolt. "Was horrible. Except you. *You were amazing. Holy kriff*, I can't believe you talked us out of that. Talk about magic."

He shuddered, slumped, let out a long breath as his head thumped back against the wall. It wasn't comfortable. The walls on this floor were apparently marble or coated in as much. The sconces were shaped like tiny wiggling Hutts with flames in their mouths. The plates indicating numbers for rooms and directions nearby pointed to another pool and the casino floor and the elevators, to a gym and a boutique. Not just laundry— a boutique. Whatever the hell that meant.

"Keep saying things like that, and I'll have to show you something *really* amazing," she teased, running a gloved finger up the back of his neck before stepping away to survey their territory. "Besides, I didn't really *lie* about anything. *We are* undercover, and there are dangerous people running around." She pointed at herself for good measure. "So whaddya think? Hit the lifts and get the frack outta here? Don't think they'll be too keen on us hanging around to enjoy the pool or get a pedicure, much as I'd like one."

"Maybe. If they catch us coming out, though, we'll be trapped for then to shoot. What's that one Basic expression you say?" He snapped his fingers. "The fishes being in the basket?"

"Fish in a barrel?" Qyreia offered. "Yeah, possibly."

"Yeah, ay, that. And nice as you still look, I'm not so put together no more." He gestured at his dusty, bloodied, sweat-soaked shirt stuck to him in every place, and equally scuffed pants and shoes. "I'll stick out." Ruka chewed on the inside of his cheek, narrowing eyes at her, then sighed. "Don't suppose there's any point in me suggesting we split up, you go on ahead out the front quick as you can and I'll see about finding some other way out?"

"You're right," she said, offering him a hand and helping him to his feet. "There is no point in suggesting that. We're getting out of this together without any of your martyr business. Cora might not kill me, but the kids *would*."

"I do not have *'martyr* business," he shot back, rolling his eyes, tone offended and face scrunching, but the look that she leveled him then was so completely terrifying in the pain it promised if he dared go on that his mouth clicked shut. He tried again after a beat. "I mean— I'm not. Uh. Sorry? I mean, I am sorry, I think, I didn't do anything— *Ashla and Bogan* stop looking at me like that, okay, okay, okay, ay, not with the upsetting the kids or Cor or you, different plan."

"That's what I *thought*," she said, poking him amiably in the chest, making sure to avoid the red spots. "Now... what about the stairs? We can do stairs. There's up and down, and we can always run off into another floor."

That had the Sith considering. "You have a point. And hell, if we go up and find roof or balcony access, I can always get us down that way."

"Beats trying to get out through a drain pipe at the pool." She elbowed him gently. "Not that there wouldn't be plenty of eye candy there."

"Your thirst would need the pool," he taunted lightly, straining a grin as he started for the closest stairwell the signage indicated, trying to walk and not run, given they weren't alone. Other guests were moving about the hall at intervals, and a maid's cart far down near the end slowly progressed as she went in and out of rooms. Glittering groups cluttered in front of the lifts. Spacious, the hotel hallway was not unlike a hyperlane; empty pockets of silent space broken up by occasional burst of life and activity. And it seemed like every eye was on them, and on his dishevelment, and as if their guilt was just *known*.

"My *thirst*?" She shrugged in the noncommittal way he knew meant *something*. "Okay. Fine." She stepped ahead and opened the door to the stairs, motioning him in with an open hand. "Lead the way then. Us thirsty folk need to drink up *something*, even if it is just a view."

Ruka sputtered for a moment, caught somewhere between an indignant flush and the very sure feeling that his foot was lodged between his teeth with his far he'd stuck it in his mouth, and settled on just rubbing at his face and moving forward.

"Sorry," he muttered as he passed. "Call that one a miss on the joking."

Inside the stairway, the Mirialan immediately looked down, just barely leaning over the railing. Sure enough, there were staff at some levels, but the one directly below them was swarming with suited bodies, and more on their way up, armed. He jerked back.

"Annd definitely going up."

"Not gonna argue with that," she replied, quickly making for the *up* direction on the stairs.

The guards below noticed the uniquely-colored duo almost as soon as they'd begun their ascent, and soon it was a race to the top. Ruka's joke was forgotten as the Zeltron fought her dress's form-hugging cut with each upward bound. The Mirialan tried to offer to carry her, but she silently refused him before he could properly get a word out, grateful at least that she was wearing flats and not heels.

They'd gone up a few flights when Ruka got a nagging feeling on the back of his neck, akin to the hair standing on end. "*Crovja*, something's not right."

"What?" she huffed back, only to stop cold when she turned her head back to the stairs ahead. "...Ah *frack*."

Pirates, clearly wearing the blazon of the Revenants, were making their way down the stairs. Several paused several flights above as they began to notice the pair ascending toward them.

Maybe it was the fact that they were obviously fleeing from casino security, or maybe it was something else about them — maybe even nothing about them, as said pirates looked armed to the teeth and not much like they'd planned to enjoy the festivities, possibly up to their own theft. Whatever it was, the tension seemed to build and snap like a coil, and before they even got up to the next landing, blasters were being drawn. The Hutt clansmen also took notice of this, and their weapons raised, shouting orders for control.

Yeah. Fish in a barrel, alright.

"Qyreia!" Ruka yelled, half in warning and half just in desperation, the Force screeching at him and telling him where and when to move as he ducked back from a bolt of plasma and pressed them both to the stairwell wall. More shots went off. Not just blasters, but sharp, booming cracks too, and he yelped when a bullet ricocheted off a railing and spit right into the floor near their feet. Their only saving grace was that three groups of people couldn't effectively shoot each other when they were stacked on top of each other, and so the guards kept storming up and the pirates started rattling on down.

The Zeltron chuckled from her position between Ruka and the wall. "Oh my, Ruka, how *forward* of you."

"Really?" he groaned. "Right *now*?"

"Shut up," she shot back, twisting her hand out and under his arm to bring her pistol up and shoot a pirate through the handrails one floor above. "You like it."

"And how's that?" he demanded, motioning downward and sending several guards tumbling back down a landing.

“Because you keep coming back to me.”

It was difficult to tell in that instant if that was supposed to be a joke, or something else entirely; because it was true. He didn't have much time to debate, as the merc wriggled free, blasting up and down in equal measure.

“You clear us a path up. I'll keep the downstairs schuttas occupied as we go.”

Ruka growled between another volley of sparsely exchanged fire and clamoring footsteps, but nodded to her, drawing two of the vibrodaggers he'd brought along, since, much like his lightsaber, other weaponry of his would've been obvious.

Without another word the Sith sprang off the wall and launched himself straight to the next landing, trusting his bare back to the Zeltron, sailing over the stairs entirely, then disappeared from her view briefly as he charged on up. The Dark Side pumping through his veins emboldened every step and leap, and he climbed the ascent in moments, up, up, twisting around a railing and crashing into the midst gathered pirates like a cannonball.

The daggers were shorter than his normal crystal blades, but the vibrating, serrated edges no less deadly, and each an equal, grave weight in his palms as he balanced and spun, pivoting and punching, slicing at anything in reach with Force-fueled speed. There wasn't time space in there cramped quarters to be selective in his targets, and only his supernatural abilities kept him on his feet in the tangle of flailing limbs, guns, and clothing. Several of the pirates weren't so lucky, tumbling when he cut them down, jostling into their fellows.

Shots went off. Around him and down below, echoing, over and over and over in the stairwell, **BANGBANGBANGBANGbangbangbang**. Something burned across his abdomen too quick and hot for his senses to catch. But none of the shooting below seemed to reach him, and he knew Qyreia was raining down hellfire like some avenging, ancient goddess of myth.

“Get back here!” was the predominant call from the guards as the Zeltron fired and ran, then fired again.

Up and up she went, gradually catching up to the Mirialan's handiwork, only to find the mire of bodies — both dead and severely wounded — more of a hindrance than a help. She was no longer even trying to avoid soiling her dress. They were *well* past that point. She just needed to keep up and keep ahead of the Hutt's cronies.

Several half-vaulted steps up though, and a hand grasped weakly at her ankle. One of the wounded Revenants was blindly looking for help amid his pain. Qyreia shook him off and continued forward, sometimes using her hands just to climb through the lumpy morass.

That was when she felt a tug at the hem of her dress, and she had to stop her ascent simply to keep the one shoulder strap from slipping away and leaving her rather *exposed*.

She looked back to see a casino guard grabbing tight to her dress, baring rather glaringly her leg occupying the slit in the skirt.

"Got you now."

Qyreia sneered, picked up a foot, and launched it backward into his groin. "Hands off the dress, asshole," she growled, tugging it away from his loosened grasp while he pondered the high pitched squeal leaking from his lungs.

Another kick, this time to the chest, sent him tumbling backward into the other guards close behind. The resultant avalanche of bodies meant that they would be hard pressed to catch up for quite some time.

As Qyreia turned back around and made yet again to haul herself onwards, adjusting her garment, *yet another* hand reached towards her. This one, though, was a familiar green and inked black, and turned up and open-palmed, offered from the next four landings up.

"May I offer the Lady a hand?" Ruka asked, panting visibly, sprayed in red all over. The Zeltron cringed slightly, hoping most or all of it wasn't his, but not particularly delighted by the gore either way. His words did get a huff and smile though, and there was enough of a lull in the fire from below to afford his sticking himself out over the edge, apparently.

"You may," she replied in her most pompous tone, undone a little by the fact that she was gasping too. She could trek for several kilometers with a pack of gear and her rifle, but it had been a long evening and racing up a seemingly skyscraper's worth of stairs was just beyond the pale. Reaching as if to take the proffered hand, she felt herself become weightless yet again as the Mirialan levitated her up, briefly floating her over the railing and then down before him, their fingers briefly twining. Behind him, a door labeled for rooftop access had been violently blasted off its hinges, granting them the sight of the Garganta Galleria Casino Hotel's sloping, limelit, golden dome and the skyline of Tipool City beyond.

Qyreia's eyes sparkled momentarily at the sight. "You know, you're lucky we're both married to different people."

High off the adrenaline and stress and the close prospect of escape, Ruka tipped his head back and laughed for once instead of rebuffering her or stammering. He smiled at her. "We are both very lucky. To have them and each other. Now *come on*." He tugged on her hand and stepped out onto the roof, the wind whipping around them strong enough at this height to make them

wobble and rip his already-loosened tail and her careful coifs free, blowing their hair around them. The gust off the nearby ocean died down after a moment, allowing them enough reprieve to start towards the nearest edge, lined in spotlights and carvings.

They peered over the lip, the curving shape of the building not allowing for as much of a direct view as one might have liked. This side had smaller buildings, more of the casino's amenities, and a lot of concrete. Doable, but not as ideal. With a shared glance, they followed the precipice's edge along the roofline, rounding at a heart-pounding run that the wind made all the more fantastical until sprawling gardens came into view. Or, more specifically: sprawling gardens and a massive lake, replete with fountains going off on timers and colorful lights for some sort of watery show.

"Okay?!" Ruka shouted to be heard, turning to the Zeltron and squeezing her hand.

"Okay? *Okay?! What, you mean we're gonna jump off this fracking thing?!*"

"YES!" The sun was sinking low now, washing everything in soft, ephemeral colors and lighting the roof and water like flames. The guards would be coming. There wasn't a lot of time for nerves. "Do you trust me?!"

"I mean... *yes?!?*" She looked down at the long, long way to the water pool below. "Goddamn, it's always something melodramatic with you!"

"You like crappy Besh melodramas!" he countered, and tugged her into his chest, winding an arm around her waist and cinching tight as he channeled the Force once more into his legs, not giving any more time for hesitation. "Hold on!"

And then he *jumped*.

Qyreia barely had the sense to scream as they hurtled down from the rooftop, stringing together gibberish that coalesced into profanity, then devolved in laughter as she found a modicum of joy in her impending doom. Because below them was a pool of water whose surface tension was going to hit their legs like a slab of concrete. She trusted him, but this was a bit much. That was, as they seemed to dance, knifing down through the air, Ruka gripped her tighter, extended a hand, and *pushed*. It was like a pulse that slowed them to a strange, briefly floating halt some several meters above the water.

Then they dropped again, the Zeltron's peals of screaming laughter turned to gurgles as they submerged.

The water wasn't horribly deep though, and as Ruka released her, they both swam up to the surface. Qyreia choked and coughed out water from the unexpected *everything* that just

happened, while Ruka merely treaded water with a tender care to his many injuries that he now had to nurse. A condition that was no less frustrated when the Zeltron splashed at him.

"The frack was that?!"

"You mean how I stopped us? It was just..."

She splashed him again. "It was just that you coulda said," she chided, deepening her voice for the impression, "*I'm Ruka the space wizard and I'm going to break our fall with my magic powers. You know: not just asking me to trust you and throwing us both off a building.*"

Ruka looked at her with a caring face despite the addition splash thereto. "Are you hurt?"

That seemed to get the Zeltron to stop her ranting, if momentarily. "If I am, will you kiss it and make it feel better?"

"No."

Damn. "Then no. I'm good."

Ruka snorted, then treaded a bit closer and pressed a wet kiss to the top of her wet head.

"I'm sorry I didn't think to explain, but I'm glad you're okay."

Qyreia flushed and gave a few flustered mumbles, mostly to the effect of calling him a dumbass. Pulling back, he glanced around them. There were resortgoers gawking at them, and so, taking a page from her book, he made an awkward bow, trying to play it off. The Zeltron waved and made a sort of dripping curtsy that really didn't have much effect when her whole waist was underwater. Nevertheless, their idling, paltry audience started clapping and chattering, and the bank was looking very inviting suddenly.

"Get to the *Kartuno* and get the hell out of here?" Ruka asked through his teeth, heading towards dry ground.

One gawker had Qyreia look down at her white dress, and her arms instantly crossed over her chest, one hand still holding her pistol. "Yeah, sounds like a great idea."

The Mirialan looked over and reddened, coughing. He shrugged out of his knife holsters and then shirt, offering the soaked, bloodied, somewhat torn article for cover. It was white too, but the extra layer would help, and they still had a few city blocks to cross. He'd make a sight in a collar and pants, but an easier to write off one, and better him than her.

"Next time I'll save my coat to offer, ay?"

"Keep it," she said with a soggy wave of her gloved hand. She flashed her pistol and at least the one that had been looking so intently turned and walked away. It got a wry smile out of her. "I'll be okay."

They started slogging through the little lake steadily, of no mind to stick around long enough for Hutt Cartel forces or anyone of the Revenants or the unfriendly Principate faction. Less friendly, anyway. None of it was good, and they had destroyed the crystals rather than claim them for anyone.

"Can't just take it, make me put this thing back on," Ruka chuckled, visibly struggling to do so between sticking, soaked fabric, the collapsed sleeves, and his own wet skin. The movement actually agitated the now-visible wounds across his torso and arms, small things from the shrapnel and one good shot along his side, but nonetheless. "You know what, no, nope, I'm littering, it can float here, maybe a bird will die in it, I'm done."

That gave the Zeltron a great big laugh, and she waded over to him just as they neared the water's edge. Her pistol arm still covered her chest, but her other wrapped around his waist and held him close as they walked off.

"Look on the bright side." She flashed the credit chit still tucked away in her glove. "Kids can still go to college."

Ruka's mouth dropped in surprise before he wheezed another laugh, leaning a little heavily onto the Zeltron as exhaustion ate at his heels. He'd done so much in a short amount of time.

"You know, they're not exactly hurting for it anymore, with Cor's family money, which still still blows me away— though it bugs me a little too? But it's for *them* so— also not? I dunno. Whatever. We can all go on vacation or something. And you can actually get that pedicure and a drink and we'll save a dance. Deal?"

She leaned her head on his cool, damp skin, smiling. "Deal."